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SUBJECT: SOUTH AFRICAN ENVIRONMENT, SCIENCE, AND TECHNOLOGY MONTHLY BRIEFINGS, MARCH 2009

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¶1. (U) Summary: This is the South African Environment, Science and Technology Monthly Briefings Newsletter, March 2009, Volume 4, Number 3, prepared by the U.S. Embassy Pretoria, South Africa.

Topics of the newsletter:

-- SOUTH AFRICANS JOING EARTH HOUR -
REDUCE POWER USANGE BY 15%

-- NEW HOMES FOR SOUTH AFRICAN PENGUINS

-- SOUTH AFRICA BANS COMMERCIAL ALBALONE FISHING

-- DANES PROMOTE WIND MAPPING

-- MYSTERY FOAM POLLUTES JOBURG RIVER

-- LOCALS THREATEN TO BBQ FLAMINGOES

-- NECROTIZING BACTERIA DISCOVERED IN KZN LAGOON

-- LIONS TREE POACHER

-- CAPE WHALES FACE NEW THREAT

-- DISCOVERING THE HADEDAS NOISY SECRETS

-- SMUGGLER SLAUGHTERS LIONS AND RHINO IN HIS BACKYARD

-- MONTHLY FACTOID

South Africans Join Earth Hour -
Reduce Power Usage by 15%

¶2. (U) ESKOM spokesman Fani Zulu said South Africans reduced their power usage by 15 percent during Earth Hour 2009. Zulu said there was a 400MW of power cut between 20:30 and 21:30 on Saturday March 28, which means South Africans turned off 4.7 million 60 watt light bulbs. World Wildlife Fund South Africa (WWF/SA) Head Morne Du Plessis noted that over 100,000 South Africans signed up to participate in the campaign. Patrons in some restaurants around Johannesburg were also asked to dine by candle light in order to join in.

New Homes for South African Penguins

¶3. (U) The Boulders Beach penguin colony near Cape Town has fallen 30 percent from a peak of 3,900 birds in 2005 to 2,600. Breeding pairs on the more remote Dyer island have plummeted from 23,000 breeding pairs in the early 1970s to just 1,500 pairs in 2008. Penguins normally mate for life. Some experts fear the species will die out in as little as a decade. The African penguin, also called the jackass because of its bray, is the only one to inhabit the African continent. It has shorter feathers than the Antarctic birds because it doesn't face cold and is just 50 centimeters (20 inches) tall. The Boulders Colony began in 1985 when a couple of penguins moved from Dyer onto the beach near the Simon's Town naval base. Dyer Island Conservation Trust Chairman Wilfred Chivell blames poor fisheries management for dwindling supplies of sardines and pilchards, the penguins' main food. Table Mountain National Park Ranger Monique Rutherford says the competition for fish is so intense that young seals attack penguins to rip the fish from their bellies.

¶4. (U) Gulls prey on the eggs and young chicks, often working as a team.

When nesting penguins leave their eggs to chase away invaders, other gulls sneak in and steal the eggs. Table Mountain Park Rangers recently placed 200 penguin nesting boxes at Boulders Beach. Each box is big enough to house a family of parents, eggs and chicks. The boxes, made of a fiberglass mix, are shaped like a burrow and dug into the sand, mimicing real Boulders Beach penguin nests. Rangers say the boxes will provide shelter from the heat and a better defense against egg-stealing gulls. The experiment has already worked well on Dyer. The 1,000 boxes there have 80 percent occupancy. Rutherford hopes the Boulder Beach penguins will take to the newly installed boxes in time to lay a second batch of eggs before the laying season ends in April.

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South Africa Bans Commercial Abalone Fishing

¶5. (U) The Department of Environment Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) announced February 28, 2009 that it would ban commercial abalone fishing. Key factors contributing to this decision were the continued decline in abalone stocks, increased poaching and the migration of West Coast Rock Lobster into abalone areas. The total allowable catch (TAC) had already been reduced annually from 615 tons in 1995 to a record low of 125 tons for the 2006/7 season. DEAT met with the South African Abalone Association to discuss alternative livelihoods opportunities prior to announcing closure of the fishery. DEAT officials said they provided information on Boat-based Whale Watching (BBWW), White Shark Cage Diving (WSCD), and marine aquaculture. DEAT representatives claim the abalone fishers had little interest in these opportunities and demanded that the commercial fishery be re-opened. DEAT officials added that the fishing community was to provide candidates for these alternative occupations by February 16, 2009, however no nominations were received. In December 2008, DEAT distributed questionnaires to fishers asking what relief they wanted. DEAT officials state that only three completed questionnaires were received out of a total of more than 308 fishers.

Danes Promote Wind Mapping

¶6. (U) A Danish-South African joint venture will produce a South Africa wind atlas to assist in determining the wind resource available for energy generation. Riso Wind Consult National Laboratory for Sustainable Energy Manager Jens Carsten Hansen said, "Determining the wind resource accurately is important, and difficult. If the wind speed differs just 5% from one location to the other, there is a 15% difference in the income generated for the same investment." Risx forms part of the Technical University of Denmark, and is the world's largest wind energy research

association. Department of Minerals and Energy (DME) South Africa Wind Energy Program (SWAEP) Project Manager Andr Otto advised that DME will contribute R5-million (\$50K) to the wind atlas project, with the Danish embassy providing R20-million (\$2M). The new wind atlas project will target the Western Cape, as well as areas of the Northern and Eastern Cape. The first version of the atlas should be available in 2010.

-----Mystery Foam Pollutes Joburg River-----

¶17. (U) White foam accumulated in and around a section of the Sand River in Sandton on March 30, 2009. The foam, which was pouring out of a storm drain, appeared to be soap suds and was 1.5 meters high by the early afternoon. Joburg Water Spokesperson Baldwin Matsimela said there had been complaints that factories in nearby Wynberg were dumping contaminants into the river. Wetlands and riparian expert Paul Fairall said a Wynberg washing powder factory regularly washes its solphonic acid into the storm water drains that flow into the

Sand River. (Solphonic agent is the foaming agent of washing powders.) Fairall added, "The acid kills any kind of living organism in that concentration." CSIR Ecosystems and Human Health Research Group Leader Dr Paul Oberholzer said that the contaminant would change the chemical structure of the water by either raising or lowering the pH. He commented, "This affects the entire food chain - birds, fish, micro vertebrates, and phytoplankton (algae) - because some species have a certain ph tolerance." Oberholzer also noted that detergents also contain phosphate, a substance that encourages blue-green algae growth, which can be toxic.

-----Locals Threaten to BBQ Flamingos-----

¶18. (U) Birdlife SA Executive Director Mark Anderson has dismissed threats from the Kimberly Residents Association to "make flamingo braais and fillets" from the South African's only breeding population of lesser flamingo at the Kamfers Dam. Residents are concerned that environmental appeals will stop the planned R2 billion Northgate Development, which includes shops, eight schools and 3,500 houses. Anderson noted that the Kamfers Dam flamingo nesting site is located opposite the project. More than 8000 flamingos have been seen at the Dam, an artificial breeding site that Birdlife SA created and which is now one of only six breeding sites in the world. Anderson maintains that the EIA process for Northgate was flawed because alternative sites were not evaluated - an essential component when the potential adverse impact on birds

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has been scientifically documented. Anderson also issued warnings about malfunctioning sewage works, stating that recent water quality tests reveal high percentages of coliform bacteria and E. coli. Northern Cape Dept. of Environment and Conservation (DTEC) spokesman Mandla Ndzilli noted that, "Any contact with flamingoes or the water in the Kamfers Dan should be avoided to prevent individuals from becoming infected with water-borne disease." Lesser flamingos are a protected species. Killing them could result in prosecution, a maximum fine of R10,000 and two years in jail.

-----Necrotizing Bacteria Discovered in KZN Lagoon-----

¶19. (U) KwaZulu Natal South Coast's Mpenjati Reserve remains closed until scientists can discover what caused a bacterial infection that led to amputation of the leg of well-known author and journalist RW Johnson. Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife spokesman Simpiwe MxakaZa said they have not yet determined the exact bacteria causing the infection, although water samples have been taken. Sources outside the government state that water samples show a concentration of necrotizing fasciitis, commonly referred to as a "flesh-eating virus." Hospital records indicate that fourteen strains of bacteria were identified in the wound. Johnson, a former London Times correspondent, cut his foot on a rock during a swim in the

lagoon on March 11, 2009. Less than 24 hours later, he was hospitalized and his leg was amputated on March 19, 2009. His left hand continues in poor condition and his finger tips may also need to be amputated. Johnson was appointed Director of the Helen Suzman Foundation after his return from the U.K. and has written several books, including "South Africa's Brave New World", and "Since the End of Apartheid".

Lions Tree Poacher

¶ 10. (U) A small game poacher spent two hours in a tree, trying to hide from lions in the Munyawana Game Reserve in northern KwaZulu-Natal on April 1, 2009. Police spokesperson Captain Jabulani Mdletshe said the man was one of a group of four poachers who went into the reserve to poach small game. He added, "They managed to get a wild hog. On their return home, they were attacked by two lions. Three of the group escaped but one decided to climb a tree, leaving his hunting dogs at the bottom to defend him." Mdletshe said the lions killed all six dogs, leaving the bones scattered around the tree. The poacher was able to escape when the lions chased after a hyena. Mdletshe added that the poacher had been taken to a clinic for treatment of claw scrapes, but fled before police could arrest him. Phinda Private Game Reserve Director Kevin Pretorius said the Reserve did not normally have problems with poachers. Mdletshe noted that a case had been opened and the police anticipate an arrest in the near future.

Cape Whales face New Threat

¶ 11. (U) Rescue Vleesbaai Action Group Chair Mareo Bekker condemned PetroSA's plans for a liquid natural gas mooring facility in a known whale-breeding site on the Western Cape. He noted that the plan is "ill-conceived, short-sighted and environmentally damaging." PetroSA defended the plan, commenting that reserves off Mossel Bay are dwindling and that facility is needed to prevent closure of the Qare dwindling and that facility is needed to prevent closure of the gas-to-liquids operation there. Most of the gas will be used to power Eskom's Gourikwa power station, which was expanded in 2008. Locals argue that PetroSA achieved the rezoning by stealth. Bekker said, "The Environment Impact Assessment (EIA) process is fatally flawed; PetroSA has already entered into contracts for the supply of gas and the erection of buildings. We fear the EIA is a smoke screen to appease the public." Coastal ecologist Allan Heydorn expressed concern about both the effect of noise and pollution on the whales and dolphins that frequent the bay, and the possibility that the animals could become entangled in underwater cables. He warned, "In the event of slow or insidious pollution and littering, the entire inter- and sub-tidal ecosystem and the near-shore marine food webs will be placed at risk. This will have serious consequences for the coastal ecology and the livelihood of people in terms of fishing." PetroSA responded that the Mossel Bay Refinery would close by 2010 if the project was not allowed to proceed, with the loss of 2,000 jobs.

Discovering the Hadedas Noisy Secrets

¶ 12. (U) Wits University School of Animal, Plant and Environmental

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Sciences Professor Craig Symes launched a study of the ubiquitous Gauteng hadeda. Hadedas, found throughout the province on roofs and lawns, awaken neighborhoods each morning with their loud squawks. They are not native to the province and originated from wetter coastal regions, arriving in Cape Town in the mid-1980. Hadedas then traveled north to Gauteng. Symes will use color-coded rings to identify birds. Ringing the birds has not been an easy task; Symes has had to tackle birds and climb trees to get to fledglings. A similar project has been running in Cape Town. In Cape Town birds breed in winter while in Gauteng they breed in summer. Symes hopes to learn whether the same birds nest in the same place each year and whether they mate for life.

Smuggler Slaughters Lions and Rhinos
in his Backyard

¶13. (U) A suspected smuggler was arrested in an upscale Pretoria neighborhood on April 1, 2009 for allegedly killing lions and rhinos in his backyard. Police had received a tip that wild animals were being killed at the home. South Africa Police Service (SAPS) Crime Intelligence Gathering Unit, Tshwane Metro Police, and the Tshwana Agriculture and Environment Management Office raided the house, along with DEAT's Green Scorpions. They recovered dozens of animal skulls, bones and teeth. Tshwane Community Safety Department Spokesman Console Tleana said bones were found hidden in the bathroom, in meal bags, in bedrooms and with maize (corn) meal bags.

He added the police also found a "substantial amount" of foreign currency in the house. Tleana said police believe the animals were killed for their skins, bones and horns which are sold in Eastern markets as medical and sexual aids. The Health Department is conducting tests, and will fumigate and sanitize the home once testing is completed. Tleana noted the police do not know if the animals were native to South Africa or brought into the country illegally prior to being slaughtered. He confirmed that thirteen lions had been killed at the house, and added that authorities had not been able to determine how many rhinos had been slaughtered.

The smuggler is a Vietnamese national who had been renting the house since January 2009. Police authorities believe he has been in the country for over a year.

Monthly Factoid

¶14. (U) In 1991, South Africa became the first country in the world to provide full protection status for the Great White shark within its jurisdictional waters. Countries including USA, Australia, Malta and Namibia followed later.

La Lime